

**ACTING:
ITS IDEA AND TRADITION**

By the Same Author

THE ANGEL IN THE MIST

THE UNBROKEN HEART

ACTING:
ITS IDEA AND TRADITION

BY
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To
E. MARTIN BROWNE

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These three lectures were delivered to the Guild Theatre Studio, 3 Roger Street, W.C., during the autumn of 1938. They are now published almost exactly as they were given, in the hope that they may be of interest to a wider circle of amateur dramatic students, and may suggest to Amateur Societies throughout Great Britain something of that tradition by which the Theatre lives. They are in no sense a handbook; they are only a modest guide. Their purpose is less to instruct the student than to enlarge the horizon of his studies.

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THE IDEA OF ACTING

THE IDEA OF ACTING

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I am greatly honoured by the invitation to address you this afternoon. I hope in the course of these lectures to make a few suggestions which may not only be of value to you in your own work but may also be of value to me in mine. For our work is linked more closely than many people imagine. There is, I know, in my profession, an ignorant and vulgar sort of snob who affects to despise the Amateur Stage. I have never heard of this gentleman despising his audience—indeed he will often make the most inglorious betrayals to secure its favour—but has he never realized that the Amateur Stage will supply him with his audiences of to-day and to-morrow? Does he never consider how his own reputation stands to gain by an increase of critical judgment on the part of those who watch him? Does it not occur to him that a public accustomed to practise the good things of the theatre will respond more readily to his own efforts—if these are at all worthy of his self-importance?

I am not suggesting for one moment that the critical and the creative faculties are identical. There are many preachers who had much

better abstain from practice—and *vice versa*. But it remains roughly true, I think, to say that those of you who are seriously engaged in your spare time in the study of theatrical art will better appreciate the achievements and the demerits of those who practise it professionally, and set the public standard by which it must ultimately be judged. You are probably tired of hearing that the Theatre is a co-operative art, and although, as you will find presently, I am not one of those who would belittle the actor's individual importance—indeed, it will be my chief concern to stress it—this remains roughly true. No play can come alive without actors to interpret, designers to decorate, and a producer to direct it. And the labours of all these people presuppose an audience. Without an audience they cannot be applauded and—what is perhaps more important—they cannot be paid. The audience is the final judge, and from its verdict there is no appeal. The audience makes or mars theatrical reputations and theatrical fortunes. When the determining appetite of audiences in this country is for the best that the Theatre can give them, the Theatre will cease to disappoint the nobility of its vocation. And not till then.

You will, therefore, forgive me if I regard you finally as an audience—which, indeed, of your present kindness and patience, you are. Let me say at once that I do not underestimate the accomplishment of amateur acting. The

best performances I have ever seen of the Ghost and Fortinbras in *Hamlet*, of Biron and Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost*, of Sir Peter Teazle and Mrs. Candour in *The School for Scandal*, were given by amateurs. There are many amateur actors in this country who habitually give performances of the highest quality. I am thinking of the late Paget Bowman, whose reading of *Hamlet* was, I am told, a thing not to be forgotten, and of Mr. Ralph Alderson, to whose Sir Peter Teazle I have just referred. Competent judges have told me that in this part Mr. Alderson is equal to Sir Herbert Tree, whose performance was generally reckoned among the finest of his career. I did not see Tree as Sir Peter, so I cannot say. But I cannot imagine a performance in Old Comedy more fragrant, more tender, more human, more true—in a word more beautifully bred—than Mr. Alderson's. And remember this—there is no genre of acting where accomplishment is so difficult as in Old Comedy. None demands a technique so invulnerable, a control so sure. If the constantly practising amateur can achieve perfection here, he can achieve it anywhere. There may be other actors unknown to me but known to you, who are the equal of Mr. Alderson. So do not set a limit to your possible attainment. Your only limit is your ability.

I have divided this inquiry into the nature of acting into three parts, and in successive lectures I shall try to examine its idea, its tradition, and its technique. In practice, of

course, it is difficult to discuss these different aspects without relation to each other, and what you will get is an emphasis on one rather than an exclusion of the rest. A few weeks ago I was playing the part of Vivaldi, the exceedingly histrionic actor in Mr. Bridie's stimulating play *The King of Nowhere*. In the last act Vivaldi is reproached for his insincerity.

"All the time," says the middle-aged woman who has fallen in love with him, "you were only acting."

To this Vivaldi replies with considerable passion:

"Only acting? Only acting? Great heavens, woman, to act is to create the perfect union between body, mind, and spirit."

I suggest this retort as an excellent spring-board for our investigation. Certainly the good performance is one in which body, mind, and spirit move together with a creative spontaneity. No other of the interpretive arts falls under this definition except dancing; and dancing and acting are very closely allied. They are more allied than most actors and many teachers of acting would lead you to suppose. Both interpret mood and character by means of mime and gesture and movement, and the difference is simply that dancing is set to music and acting is set to speech. The stuff of both is narrative and drama; the best ballets, like the best plays, tell a good story. The emphasis of modern choreography since Nijinsky has been very largely on interpretation, and

although I did not see Nijinsky, I have no doubt that his performances in ballets like *Scheherazade* or *Après midi d'un faune* aroused in his audiences an excitement not essentially different from the excitement Sarah Bernhardt aroused in *Phèdre* or Coquelin in *Cyrano*. I shall have more to say about the kinship of acting and dancing later on, but I will only mention in passing that M. Saint-Denis, in his courses at the London Theatre Studio, lays a primary emphasis upon it. I have no doubt that this emphasis has a great deal to do with the discipline and rhythm of M. Saint-Denis's productions.

Yet, when we come to examine it, Mr. Bridie's (or Mr. Vivaldi's) definition of acting is not quite a complete one. It describes a part of what good acting is; it does not say what good acting intends. Every human act must be judged by its intention, and this holds good in æsthetic no less than in ethical law. An act, beautiful in itself, charitable and beneficial in its effect, proceeding from apparently altruistic motives, may be the result of pure self-love. Like many of the larger gestures of philanthropy, it may have for its object the applause or the gratitude of men, the acquisition of place and power. It may do immense good; it may give intense pleasure; but it is not good in itself. Similarly, a performance on the stage may not be judged by the intensity of its immediate effect, its provocation to laughter or tears. It is possible—because I have seen it

done—to give as Hamlet a superlative performance of Henry V, and gain a considerable measure of applause. It was not, by any stretch of indulgence, a good performance of Hamlet; it was not even an entirely satisfying performance of Henry V, because it happened to have strayed into the wrong part and the wrong play; but it was a very stimulating afternoon.

What, then, is the object which the actor should ever hold up before him? You will answer, perhaps, on the very highest authority: "To hold the mirror up to Nature"; but that does not tell us a great deal. The ingenuity of man has invented many sorts of mirrors—some convex, some concave, and some which play the most fantastic tricks before the vanity of woman. They all reflect Nature; they all pay her some tribute of truth; but they reflect her in various ways and different proportions, and they are true, equally, to themselves. You may say, if you like—though the phrase has only a muddled sort of meaning—that Shakespeare was the supreme poet of nature. Yet in what way is the gorgeous rhetoric of Richard II a reflection of Royalty in defeat? Kings do not commonly talk like this at the crisis of their lives, although, like the last of the Spanish Bourbons, they may behave with dignity and withdraw in impeccable prose. Clearly, Shakespeare is interpreting the tragedy of Richard with all the bounty of his poetic and dramatic genius. He is painting a picture; he is not taking a photograph. And I may as

well commit myself here and now to the proposition that acting of the highest quality is never photographic.

What Shakespeare did with the bare Richard of history we must do with the embroidered Richard of Shakespeare. Of course we are not Shakespeare. But in that stupendous difference lies our opportunity and our power. It is just because we are not Shakespeare that Shakespeare needs us. Shakespeare's Richard stands by himself as poetry, but as drama he cannot do without us. Richard II or Macbeth, before they were acted, were merely magnificent conjectures; when Burbage had done with them they had entered into the kingdom of the stage. And so I suggest to you that the actor's place in that kingdom, hedged about by restrictions as it is, is still the chief one. The Theatre is a darkened auditorium until the actor switches up the lights. He may be ever so bound by fidelity to his dramatist's intention and his producer's orders, yet he remains the immediate source of entertainment. The play cannot go on without him; but, at a pinch, he can go on without the play. Where you have an actor, an open space in a room or on a platform, and two or three people gathered together, you have the essentials of the Theatre. You have a spectacle. He may act a murder in dumb-show, and if your blood has been duly curdled you will not go out into the street and deny that you have had your money's worth. Greatly, then, as I detest vanity and self-exploitation in

the Theatre, I must nevertheless insist that the actor remains the primary element in theatrical art, although he is seldom the chief authority.

I am not concerned with the relation between actor and producer, but you will expect me to say in what the loyalty to his author consists. I have said that even Shakespeare needs us, and it goes without saying that when an actor is in the presence of supreme genius, his first job is to find out what that genius intends, and interpret it to the best of his ability. It sounds simple, but in this interpretation lies not only the business of acting, which is difficult enough, but also the problem of saying what acting is. And it is with this second point that we are now concerned. Shakespeare had an idea of Hamlet, yet there are as many Hamlets—or very nearly—as there are actors on the legitimate stage. None of us is in possession of Shakespeare's mind; we are only in possession of its fruit. When Shakespeare said, in *King Lear*: "Ripeness is all," he was quite possibly compressing into three words the philosophy to which his life had driven him. Which of us dare say he knows what Shakespeare meant by that tremendous utterance? And who among our audience dare say he knows what we ourselves meant by our interpretation of it on the stage? The response of each member of that audience will be different. It will be governed by his—or her—experience, philosophy, heredity, or what not. It will be in itself an interpretation. Thus, to revert to our original

example, Shakespeare looks back into history and 'evokes into artistic life the fallen kingship of Richard. His business, I repeat, is to create, and that Richard is an historical figure or that Lear was a prehistoric figure matters nothing to his imaginative purposes. When Shakespeare takes, as he nearly always does take, an existing story, that is because his imagination can refashion it, not because it is true. Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, may not entirely contradict their classical or medieval prototypes, but it would not matter if they did. They are reincarnate; they are risen from the dead.

So, in a lesser degree, they are revived in us. We are the second stage in their regeneration. Sometimes you will hear it said of an actor: "This was Shakespeare's Hamlet," but the compliment has no meaning. All it meant was "Mr. So-and-so's interpretation of Shakespeare's Hamlet corresponds to my own," or "Mr. So-and-so's interpretation corresponds with the Lowest Common Denominator of what critics have written about Hamlet," or "Mr. So-and-so's interpretation corresponds with what Mr. Dover Wilson thinks about Hamlet—and Mr. Dover Wilson is the only critic worth listening to." But the fact remains that nobody, not even Mr. Dover Wilson, knows what was in Shakespeare's mind and that the performance in question was not less Mr. So-and-so's Hamlet because it seemed also to be Shakespeare's. Whatever we ourselves, as actors, may think about Hamlet, even if we all think the same thing—which is most unlikely—our

performances will be as different as ourselves. For it is not our thoughts that we put on the stage—many good actors scarcely think at all. It is our bodies, our temperaments, our voices, our personalities, yes, and even our profiles. It is through all these that any ideas we may have or may acquire from our producer must necessarily travel to the audience.

I must protest, therefore, against the idea that actors are mere robots or gramophone records to repeat a fixed interpretation. How many times have not actors enriched the parts they are called upon to play—and this not because their imaginations are superior to those of their authors, but simply because they are themselves. I can imagine Shakespeare having created the character of Sir Toby Belch, seeing the late Mr. Arthur Whitby's performance of the part, and exclaiming: "Heavens! How true! I never saw Toby like that." I hope it is among the prerogatives of Shakespeare's immortality to see the better performances of his plays, and among these performances, Whitby's Sir Toby must surely stand out—bibulous, impudent, and serene. In the same way, Sarah Bernhardt animated the pasteboard heroines of Sardou and Scribe with her own mystery and passion, or, more recently, Mr. Ernest Milton matched the pretended lunacy and complex neuroses of Pirandello's Mock Emperor with that profound sense of tragic beauty, which made the second half of his *Timon of Athens* so memorable for those who saw it. In fine, there are those

admirable performances of which the author says: "You were exactly what I intended," and those supreme performances of which he says: "You got more out of the character than I realized was there." These performances which transcend but do not contradict the author's creation, are the abiding rewards of play-going.

They are seldom the result of conscious thought. I do not imagine that Sarah Bernhardt said deliberately: "I will improve upon Tosca," or even: "I will go one better than Phédre." Yet she managed to add Byzantium to Athens and transform the temple of Corinth into the chancel of Beauvais. Her transcendence was simply in herself. Or do you suppose that our own Dan Leno or Marie Lloyd were not bigger than the songs they sang. Was it not the very essence of their genius to use a few rough verses as the bare text for their own rich commentary on their life and times? Would they have been greater artists if they had devoted their lives to the Repertory Movement and the laborious study of character-acting in drab dramas of Cockney life? Would Gracie Fields delight us more if she played in the comedies of Mr. Brighouse? Or would you like Mr. Robey to disguise his personality?

These questions answer themselves, but it is significant that one can even put them. There is abroad to-day a widespread fear of what I shall rather vaguely call "big" acting. Like all heresies, this fear is lively among the *soi-disant* intellectuals and it is these people who set the

standard of critical taste. They are perpetually asking themselves, with a kind of anguished dubiety: "What should we think of Irving if he came among us to-day? Shouldn't we find him very old-fashioned?" Well, no doubt, Chaucer is a little out-of-date, and Malory is rather romantic, and Shakespeare a trifle outspoken, and Tennyson extremely sentimental; but we do occasionally read these people. Why, in heaven's name, should Irving behave like a man about Bond Street? You might as well ask that Shakespeare should write like Mr. Shaw. Irving, I fancy, would answer his would-be critic, with a wry and ruminating smile, that his acting was as large and liberal as the cigars he smoked or the tables at which he dined; and where would Kean have been without the Romantic movement? I do not say that Irving and Kean could not have been great actors if they had lived to-day; I do say that they would not have been Irving and Kean. They would have been something else; they would perhaps have been Mr. Laughton. And if they were to reappear among us in their habits as they lived, we should have no more right to criticize their acting as old-fashioned than to criticize a Chippendale chair for not being a steel one. It might not agree with the chromium-plated dining-table and the ferro-concrete walls. But it might be a better chair.

I shall have more to say of Irving and Kean, when we consider the history of acting, but I bring their names forward now as examples of

what acting should be—exciting, individual, ✓
picturesque. I quote them as examples of that
aristocratic tradition by which the Theatre lives,
and which the intellectuals despise. The stage
has no room for liberty and equality, although its
factiousness is redeemed by its fraternity. But it
has unquestionably suffered from that levelling-
down of distinctions, that dread of eccentricity,
that fear of leadership, which have emasculated
our national life. The government of the
Theatre is hierarchical, and it has yet to show
a better face before the world than when it was
governed by good actors. What would Irving
or Tree have said to the powers of anonymous
finance which have their stranglehold on the
English theatre of to-day? How would they
have suffered their duplicities and their pre-
varications? I do not believe that such mis-
government would be tolerated in a Theatre
where big acting held its proper and traditional
place.

It is constantly being said of distinguished
players: "So-and-so is always himself." It was
said of Irving; it was said of du Maurier; it is
said of Laughton. But if our definition of act-
ing as "interpretation" be true, and if the
means of that interpretation are the personality
and the physical habit of the player, then that
criticism is proved devoid of meaning. I repeat, ✓
acting is interpretation; it is not disguise. A
friend of mine once retired to Wales to discover
a way of interpreting landscape through acting.
I think he was rather optimistic, and I have not

seen the results of his researches. But it is certainly true to say that acting is concerned with emotion and even formal beauty of voice and gesture, quite as much as with character and dramatic circumstance.

I know there are two schools of thought on this matter. There are some who say that the actor's only value is his plasticity, his capacity for imitation or disguise; and others who say that the actor is only valuable in so far as his own personality and histrionic gifts are liberated by the role he plays. I should certainly hesitate to commit myself to either of these definitions. To interpret a part one may often have to impersonate, and in what is generally called "character" acting, impersonation plays an important part. Aristotle said that all art is imitation, but it is a long way from acceptance of that profound truth to the monstrous proposition that the best acting is mimicry. I should not deny to mimicry a place in the curriculum of the dramatic schools. I would encourage students to as close an observation as possible of the life and characters around them. But I would also tell them, if they were worth teaching, that the best acting—the only acting that lives in the memory of playgoers—comes from within, and is equally the fruit of experience as of observation. I would tell them that what the actor is, that, ultimately, he plays.

Mere self-exploitation is as vulgar on the stage as in any other department of life; and it rings as hollow. Deliberately to misrepresent a char-

acter in order to win sympathy or laughter from the audience is to tell the basest of artistic lies. Merely to play for histrionic effect is as disgusting as to draw attention to oneself at a dinner-party by putting one's napkin on the top of one's head or by interrupting one's hostess to tell a funny story. There are people who will do these things, and I am afraid their bad manners are more easily tolerated on the stage than off it. They may win a temporary success; they may make a lot of money; but they will not win the applause of that "one, whose judgment should in their opinion outweigh a whole theatre of others."

For the actor is bound by one abiding loyalty and he will be valued by the extent to which he keeps his word. He is tied, body and soul, to truth. I have tried to show how this truth must be personal, how his enunciation of it is an individual interpretation, not an absolute dogma. There is no absolute truth about Hamlet, but there are divers interpretations. Yet although there are many ways of saying what Hamlet is, there is a single way of saying what he was not. There are limits, clearly marked, beyond which the actor must not stray. Hamlet did not treat his mother or his fiancée like a public-school boy politely perplexed about the facts of life. Antony was not the noble Roman of his own eulogy or of Cleopatra's fancy, and Cleopatra would not have been received at Balmoral in the great days. It is the chief difficulty of playing Cleopatra to suggest a reigning sovereign whom John Brown

would have sent packing from the gates. The actor is always being tempted to sacrifice the truth of character to the limitation of his temperament or the paucity of his talents. It is the pride that goeth before the fall.

I suppose it is a golden rule with every artist to be true to his material. The sculptor will not try to make out of Portland stone what should more properly be made of concrete, or of wood what should be made of clay. The poet will not relate the fall of Troy in a triolet, or the critic trace the influence in Milton on English poetry in nine books of iambic verse. The artist will choose the right material for the right object, and his standard will be the perfection of the thing made, not the versatility of the man who makes it. I am not primarily interested in the comparative worth of performances. If I see a satisfying performance of *Macbeth*, it is a matter to me of only secondary interest that the same actor has excelled equally as *Falstaff*. I am not denying that an actor may be able to play tragedy better, if he is also proficient in comedy—although I do not seem to remember that either Kean or Salvini or Rachel were comedians. I only know that comedy is a great school of technique and that actors are, generally speaking, the better for its discipline. But what I, as an audience, finally remember and appraise, are performances. Each performance is separate, although each may be similar. Each performance each night of the longest run is a separate artistic creation. Heaven knows,

it is difficult enough to remember this after the first few weeks. More often than not one needs some artificial stimulus—a friend or a fellow-actor in front, the excitement of an anniversary or a new audience—to move one to one's finest efforts. This may seem deplorable but it is true, and the very fact that one admits it is an argument against the long-run system. When we say that So-and-so's performance was a good one, we mean that it was good on such-and-such a night. Each night our performances die; each night they must be born again.

Versatility is only admirable in so far as it enables an actor to give a number of good performances. He is to be praised because each performance is a good one, not because they are all by the same hand. The distinction may seem to you a fine one, but it is vitally important. How often one hears ignorant people exclaim: "A good actor ought to be able to play anything"—as if one should cast Mr. Laughton as Romeo or Miss Evans as Juliet, and then blame them for not giving good performances. An actor must recognize not only the truth of the character he plays, but the facts of his physical or temperamental limitations. The French have a word for it: *optique du théâtre*. Audiences will demand of Hamlet that he does not look a prize-fighter, and the beefy actor who thinks he is showing great courage in contradicting them is only showing an inordinate conceit. Actors, I repeat, should be judged by the truth which they

communicate and the interest and the excitement they evoke.

Again, how often one hears it said: "So-and-so is always himself." Is Menuhin not always himself whether he is playing Mozart, Elgar, or Debussy? Is the unique personal authority of Toscanini incompatible with the rigid objectivity of his conducting? Does his devotion to musical truth not convey its own unmistakable trade mark? May not Swift and Newman, Tacitus and Cicero, be recognized by their styles? Do we admire the paintings of Van Gogh the less because their authorship is so transparently evident? Should we admire Manet the more if he had proved that he could paint like Delacroix or Puvis de Chavannes? Yet we complain of du Maurier that he was always himself; can we complain that he was untrue to himself or his material? If not, let us hold our peace. I do not deny that the great personalities of the stage have sometimes falsified their parts, and I would withhold my tribute from those misinterpretations. One may greatly admire the talent of Miss Bergner or Madame Pitoëff, yet hold that the one was a long way from Shakespeare's Rosalind and the other from Strindberg's Julie. It was said of Duse that she ennobled the Lady of the Camelias and paradoxically reduced the agonies of poetic drama to a very bourgeois lamentation. I do not know. But the danger is there, particularly in the greatest players, and they have not always avoided it.

The actor must not only be true to the character but to the conventions of his part, for only thus will he maintain that illusion which is the touchstone of theatrical success. A player does not make Othello real to us by turning his poetry into prose, or Mrs. Alving by turning her prose into poetry, or Titania by turning her fantasy into substance. He merely makes them theatrical. His first task is to sense the key in which his part is written and maintain it. And there is one other thing he can contribute—the gift of his imagination, not the calculated result of his technique. That thing is atmosphere, background, biography. All good performances have this power of suggesting a multitude of things outside them—the age, race, and social standing of the characters, the kind of homes they come from, the kind of books they read. No Ibsen play, for instance, is complete without a stove in one corner of the room, but when a great actress is playing Rebecca or Mrs. Alving, she brings on the stove with her. Some of you may remember Colin Clive as Stanhope and George Zucco as Osborne in *Journey's End*. Both these players brought on their background with them. They were alive. There was a signal instance of the same thing recently to be seen in London. Miss Margaret Rawlings in *The Flashing Stream* gave you her age, character, and intellect in the very moment of her first appearance. You must not ask me how it is done, because I do not know. The imagination

has its mysteries, which the artist may not tell.

These moments, these performances, in which the illusions and the splendours of the Theatre are released, justify my initial argument about the actor's pre-eminence. Mr. James Agate, in writing about Forbes Robertson, has spoken of the great actor's power to make you forget the presence of chairs and tables. Du Maurier did this in the last act of *Dear Brutus*, when he realized that his daughter was a dream. There was nothing on the stage except the pathos of his discovery. Scenery and play alike were forgotten in the illumination of his acting. He had gathered them both to himself, and made his audience at one with him. Each of us remembers moments such as these—moments of tragic beauty, or almost sublime caricature. Each has its place on the Parnassus of great acting. You will not expect me to exalt one kind above another, for that which is best of its kind is not competitive. But I will just say this, for we are living in times when I think it needs to be said.

Great acting, as we know it and as it has come down to us, is a human thing. It has concerned itself with human emotions. Furthermore it is an individual thing, expressing the emotions of individual people. We shall see later how acting has moved from its liturgical beginnings to its humanist maturity, from the interpretation of types to the interpretation of individuals. But just as there is in the world around us a growing contempt for the in-

dividual, a reversion to the group-consciousness of former times, so there is a reflection of this mood in the more advanced forms of the modern theatre. I do not deny that acting may take various collective forms, which are themselves of great dramatic value. But this I stoutly maintain: that just as the great events of the world are born in the minds of great individuals, so the greatest acting is, has been, and always will be, an individual thing.

I began this talk with an exclamation from one of Mr. Bridie's plays: I shall end it with an exclamation also, the "Let's Pretend," which is so often on the lips of children. Very young children have a strong taste for acting, the taste for being what they are not—a smuggler, a pirate, a fairy queen. They see an object and they imitate it. They want to tell the truth. They are not concerned with the exploitation of personality or the exposition of profile. They are unsentimental and quite objective. Their attitude of sitting down before the truth and describing it happily, without self-consciousness, is the healthiest possible for the actor, for it is thus that the greatest artists have written and painted and sung. *The only difference between the child and the adult is this: that in describing what he sees, the latter, being a matured personality, describes also what he is.* Only let him repeat for every increase of his powers and enrichment of his personality the well-worn words:

"Lead us not into temptation."

THE TRADITION OF ACTING

THE TRADITION OF ACTING

It is not possible to compress the history of acting into the nutshell of an hour's narration. All that I can do is to suggest a few principles which seem to me to have governed the development of the Theatre and to illustrate these from classical and modern times. I have already said that the Theatre is a co-operative art; I should now add that it is a social one. Its story is, in a large measure, the story of the societies which it has entertained. It is not easy to entertain without flattery, and we shall find that the Theatre has constantly flattered, and therefore reflected, the feelings and prejudices of its patrons. It has been the mirror of contemporary opinion in the moral, political, or religious spheres.

We are only concerned with the influence of this relation upon the actor's art. It is a commonplace to say that the Theatre had its origins in religious worship and ritual, but to see in the priest at the altar the prototype of the actor on the stage is a less general application of this truth. Yet here we have, in the nearest church, a continuing image of what liturgical acting should be—impersonal, hie-

tic, formal, and remote. The actor is not himself; neither is he a chosen and recreated character. He is not an individual at all. He is a symbol. He resumes in his own person the prayers of his congregation and his Church. Even when his soliloquy becomes a dialogue, in which one or more persons take part, even when he and his congregation are united in the singing of a hymn, or are silently prostrate before the elevated Host, he is still naked, of personality or character. His movements are a kind of ritual dance; his speech is formal and unemphatic; his giving of the Pax, or Kiss of Peace, is a conventionalized embrace. The Church has always preserved a sound instinct that the personality of the priest should never intrude in her worship; that she herself is too large and too diverse to be comprehended by the character and mannerism of a single person.

You need not, therefore, go to history for the religious origins of acting. You can see them every day. But remember that the service of the priest is still an impersonation. He reads words and makes gestures which are not his own, and he represents, quite as deliberately as the actor represents Hamlet, the society whose minister he is. Every culture is religious before it discovers the gift, and suffers from the malaise, of self-consciousness. Not having as yet the superb confidence of humanism, it lives and thinks upon its knees. Birth and death, harvest and shipwreck, marriage and procreation, are all viewed in the perspective of eternity. It is not

that man does not think of himself, but in his instinct for self-preservation he turns to God. Thus it is that when he first represents himself by means of mime and gesture and speech, he does so before a Divine audience.

The golden age of the Attic Theatre, which has had no modern parallel except, perhaps, in France under the *Roi Soleil*, matured from a religious seed. It derived from the local festivals in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine, and the great annual festivals of drama, in the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ were always held in his honour—for with the Greeks, as with us, religious instinct long outlived theological belief. The Gods, and with them the Theatre, were part of the social structure, and no public ceremony was complete without them. To-day our manners are less good. We do not precede the dramas of Miss Dodie Smith by an act of public intercession, nor do we decorate the stage even of Mr. Coward's most Aristophanic revue, with a statue of that God in whom the majority have ceased to believe. The Greeks had better memories. They did not forget those earlier days, when, on the Euboean hill-side, every actor was an amateur, and actor and audience were one. They did not forget that in their annual thanksgiving for the gift and the inspiration of wine, drama had been a single act, in which only the leader of the chorus, like the priest at the Christian altar, had stood out above his fellows. There were many dramatic

critics to the square inch in that great theatre at Epidaurus, where the tiers radiated from the stage like an open fan, and these would remember how Greek drama had begun with a dialogue between the chorus leader and his followers. We can imagine him leaping among the torches through the hot night, his face smeared with wine and pasted with vine-leaves, his speech wild, his gestures frantic. Later, the actor proper was introduced by Thespis, who has given his name to so many amateur societies; he could speak with the leader of the chorus or with the chorus itself, and enlarge the Dionysian myth. But still drama remained a common religious act, and the actor was only just beginning to think of himself as a man separate from the community, pursuing a special calling.

It was Æschylus who really gave it an æsthetic form, and it was with the introduction by him of a second actor that the profession of acting assumed a real importance, and the craft of acting began to grow. But remember that these practised performers—and they were probably as skilful as any that have followed them—were, so to speak, the cream of the Rural Competitions. They were chosen from among the reciters of poetry and epics, the harp-players, flute-players, and heralds, who contested one against the other in the Greek provinces, like the competitors at a British Drama League Festival or a Welsh Eisteddfod of to-day. When the poets ceased to act in

their plays at the Dionysia, as the yearly festival of drama at Athens was called, they chose the actors to play their chief parts. One's experience of hearing poets read their own poetry does not lead one to regret the change. Authors have always been particular—and quite rightly—about the casting of their plays. Thus we have Cleander and Mynniscus acting continually for Æschylus, and Sophocles writing plays for Tlepomenus. Sophocles introduced a third actor into the Attic drama, but the number was never increased from his time onward. About 450 B.C. the selection of actors was undertaken by the State. It was probably felt that the poet who had the best actor had the best chance of winning the dramatic prize. The procedure of selection was as follows. First of all, the archon, or manager of the festival, chose three principal players, probably by competition. These were called protagonists. Then each selected for himself a second and third player, called deuteragonist and tritagonist, respectively. Each cast was then assigned to the poets by lot, and performed all the tragedies of the poet to which it fell. The result of this was that Aristotle could write, in 350, that the success of a play depended more upon the actor than the part, and afterwards the actors were divided equally among their dramatists. Thus, in 341, Astymadas had three plays performed, of which the *Achilles* was played by Thessalus, the *Athamus* by Neoptolemus, the *Antigone* by Athenodorus. In comedy similar methods were employed.

We ask ourselves, what were those actors like? Of their high quality there is no doubt. When we consider that not more than three speaking actors could appear in any play, we can realize that there was little room for mediocrity. Then, as now, the stage was a highly competitive profession, with spectacular rewards and heart-searing disappointments. Contests were continually held between tragic actors at the *Dionysia*, and they were judged independently of the play in which they were performing. Sometimes in a new play like the *Shipwrecked Mariner*, the actor was first and the play second. At other times old plays were used for the purpose of these contests, where each actor would appear in the same play or each in a different one. These competitions were extremely popular and their results were recorded in public monuments.

This alone is evidence of the high regard in which acting was held, and there is no reason to doubt that the very critical Athenian audience set a standard by which the greatest actor of any time would have been proud to be judged. If the fifth century B.C. was an age of great drama, the fourth was an age of great acting. It was, to use an incomplete analogy, the age of the Athenian actor-manager. The fecundity of poetic inspiration of which *Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides* had been the major prophets, seemed to have dried up, and the actor, who had shared with these authors the triumphs of the former century, now had

I found that if I spoke slowly and distinctly I could be heard perfectly, but that I became inaudible whenever my speech was either too hurried or too loud. The theatre at Epidaurus is larger than the theatre at Orange, and it must have been a considerable effort for the actor to reach the farthest tiers. A performance of Greek drama was perhaps more like an opera at Covent Garden than a Shakespeare tragedy at the Old Vic. The actor had to undergo an elaborate musical training and to adhere to an abstemious diet. Sophocles never acted in any of his plays owing to the weakness of his voice. In reading of these Athenian actors I am reminded of a story which Stanislavsky tells in his great book, *My Life in Art*. When the Italian tragedian, Rossi, was visiting Moscow, Stanislavsky asked him what was required for the true performance of tragedy. "You need three things," said Rossi. "Voice—voice—and voice." We find the same emphasis in all contemporary records of the Greek theatre. We read of Neoptolemus that "his powerful voice raised him to the head of his profession," and of Licymnius that he won a prize "for his clear and resonant utterance." Many centuries later the Emperor Nero's innate histrionism led him to challenge the famous actor Epeirates. We are told that "Epeirates was in splendid voice, and as his tones were more magnificent than ever he won the greatest applause." Demosthenes writes that "Actors should be judged by their voices, politicians by

their wisdom," and Aristotle that "the science of acting is concerned with the voice and the mode of adapting it to the expression of the different passions."

These passions were indeed different. The same actor—since he was one of only three—might have to play several parts in the same tragedy. In the opening of the *Antigone*, Jocasta and Antigone were played by the same man; an attendant held the stage for fifteen lines while he changed his costume and his mask. In the *Agamemnon* the same actor would have to play the King and the Herald who announces him. The protagonist always played the principal part, and since this was very often a woman he would have not only to disguise his masculinity without loss to his resonance, but to pass from the febrility of Phaedra to Clytemnestra's dreadful adulteries, from Hecuba's agony to Medea's hatred and pride. Questions of interpretation apart, he must possess a voice of extraordinary flexibility and power.

The use of the mask was made necessary by the conventions and the actual conditions of theatrical performance. No facial play, however broad, could have carried across the vast spaces of the Athenian arena. That which would appear natural and moving behind the modern footlights would there have seemed insignificant and ineffective. The mask was admirably designed to express the dominant emotion or characteristic of the part. In comedy

it was often made in the likeness of living persons. At the first performance of the *Clouds* Socrates stood upon his seat that the audience might judge how exact the likeness was. Both in the old comedy where caricature and parody predominated, and in the new comedy which set out to be a faithful representation of ordinary life and manners, the same masks and costumes depicted the same characters. Misers were close-cropped; soldiers were shaggy-haired; courtesans wore golden ornaments; lovers were pale; and rogues were ruddy. Pride and impudence were indicated by elevated eyebrows; and the conventional conflict between passion and affection in old men was shown by the raising of one eyebrow and the dropping of the other. Sunburnt cheeks denoted health, and yokels invariably had snub noses.

The actor had naturally to conform to these conventions. Though his task was often difficult, it did not permit of much originality. It was type-acting of a sort that the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* was later to bring to a rare perfection. Equally strict were the regulations for his costume and properties; white for old men and slaves, young women and priestesses; purple for young men and a purple band for procuresses; green or light blue for old women. Old men carried a staff with a bent handle, and heiresses had fringes to their dress. But there is in every good actor an appetite for reality, which may sometimes outstep the boundaries of art but gives an eternal vitality

to our profession. This instinct will always break with a frozen convention, and a Bernhardt or a Coquelin will desert the greatest of theatrical academies. Similarly the hide-bound style of Greek acting begot its own abuses and its own inevitable rebellions. Vocal skill degenerated into mere virtuosity. Actors began to produce the most startling effects of rushing streams, roaring seas, and animal cries. Their training had divorced them from nature. Plato refers with some sarcasm to the beautiful voices of those actors whom he would banish from his ideal State, and it was the great merit of Theodorus, according to Aristotle, that he spoke with his own voice. Acting seems to have declined into ranting on the one hand and realism on the other. The veteran Mynniscus called Callipides an ape for his copying of nature, but Callipides was only illustrating a tendency which, for good or ill, is universal in the arts.

Not many years ago I was studying the Primitives at the French Exhibition at Burlington House. Two ladies were behind me and I heard one of them say: "That is how they painted before they knew how to do it." I have always thought this remark, for all its naïveté, one of the profoundest pieces of criticism I have ever heard. It will always be an open question whether art is better when artists know how to do it, and certainly there were many Athenian subscribers to the Athenian maxim, *μηδεν ἄγαν*—nothing in excess—who

thought that the Athenian actors knew how to do it too well. But acting in the grand manner cannot survive a culture, like the culture of the Roman Empire, which has largely lost the sense of tragic beauty. That sense which the English of Shakespeare's day, and the French of Racine's, and the Athenians of the fifth century so triumphantly possessed, is the signature of a great civilization, just as its exclusion by comedy is a sure test of its decline. As we have seen, there was always comedy in the Greek theatre—although the actors in tragedy and comedy were kept distinct—but a time was to come when people found the tragic actors comical. The poet Lucian laughed at their "chest paddings and stomach paddings" and "their cavernous mouths that look as if they were going to swallow up the spectators," and he wonders "how they can walk across the stage in safety." A cynic might say that Lucian's sneers were a just reward for those dramatists who had introduced scenes simply to display the actors' talents, and those actors like Theodorus, who would not suffer his fellow-players to raise their voices to the level of his own. The great Athenian song would return no more, and with it had gone the first golden age of the theatre in human record. Gone were the audiences who tolerated ribaldry but not atheism; who chased Æschylus to the altar of Dionysus because he had revealed a part of the divine mysteries; who were appalled by the unashamed agnosticism of Euripides's opening

line: "Zeus, whoever Zeus may be, for I know not save by report"; and who hissed Danæ because he had written in praise of money. No Latin poet would be made a general, because, like Sophocles in the *Antigone*, he had mixed political wisdom with his poetry. It is easy to blame the Athenian audience for its bigotry as well as to praise it for its culture. No doubt, as Aristotle says, it may have been ignorant of mythology and indifferent to artistic truth. It may have had a normal taste for happy endings. It may have wished, with the audiences of all time, to see virtue rewarded and vice punished. But it remained the context in which Athenian acting was framed, and it represented those military and moral virtues upon which the supremacy of Athenian civilization rested. It is worth our comparison, perhaps, that acting and drama both declined with the decay of that morality and courage, and the slow levelling of that supremacy.

With the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the cultural twilight of the Dark Ages, acting relapsed into an anonymity from which it never emerged until the age of Molière. Only, through the long recuperative centuries which were the matrix of modern Europe, the priest at the altar celebrated a rite ultimately fixed and always essentially unchanged. When drama began again in the churches, and went out into the churchyard and the market-place, he repeated the same gestures and very largely

the same words, day by day. He gave his blessing to those of his people who wanted to act in the Miracle, Mystery, and Morality plays whose performance punctuated, throughout the Middle Ages, the rhythm of the Christian year. Sometimes he acted in them himself, but later he watched, with a jealousy which has never quite deserted his caste, the rebirth of secular play-writing.

Here, in England, we had our golden age of drama, with Marlowe at its beginning, Shakespeare at its maturity, and Webster at its decline: but the actor does not seem to have risen to an equal peak of personal skill or public esteem. Names like Burbage are preserved for us, but they are little more than names, and *Henslowe's Diary*, though it is rich in detail, does not tell us what particular actors were like. We can get a shrewd idea from Hamlet's speech to the players as to what cultured opinion thought of contemporary acting. We know from an imaginative reconstruction of the Elizabethan playhouse something of its necessary technique. The actor was in close touch with his audience, many of his more distinguished patrons actually sitting on the stage around him. His soliloquies were confidences exchanged with his audience, not communings held with himself. There can be little doubt that the intimacy of the Elizabethan theatre permitted him a more rapid delivery than most actors can achieve to-day in Elizabethan verse; and it is only recently, under the

initiative of Granville Barker and William Poel, that we have begun to recover a little of their speed and flexibility. Doubtless, too, they could satisfy the Elizabethan love of rhetoric. Their speaking of *Tamburlaine* must have aroused the same kind of excitement in Blackfriars as an Italian soprano's high notes in *Traviata* would arouse to-day in Naples. Such tradition as the Elizabethan theatre created must have been, mainly, a tradition of speech—and in the theatre speech is music. It is worth remarking that the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries were the most creative period in English music. Those golden decades when so many soldiers were sonneteers, and no one seemed capable of writing bad prose—the years of Shakespeare and the Authorized Version—were the years of the Madrigal and the Maypole Dance. These were not, as they tend to be now, an arty-and-crafty revivalism—the sentimental refuge of a countryside which has destroyed its peasantry—but what they still are to-day in Ireland—the expression of the people's soul. The ears of an Elizabethan audience were not as cultured as the ears of those Greeks whose history and myth it never tired of recalling; but they can hardly have been less eager for the splendours of poetic diction. The actor had not, as I say, caught up with the drama he was interpreting; but he was primarily concerned to speak the speech trippingly and musically upon the tongue.

In France the situation was rather different.

The French are among the hereditary actors of the world. There has hardly ever been a time when they have not shown their mastery, and you could write a history of acting by writing a history of the French stage. More than any other people of modern Europe they have inherited the Greek tradition. Their tragedy has been directly formed upon it and their comedy shows the same willingness to submit to the classical limitations. The dramatic revival came a little later in France, but it found better actors to help it forward. Certainly we know more about them. Their position was secure, their merits widely discussed. They enjoyed the active patronage of Louis XIV at a time when the theatre in England was stifled by the evil genius of Cromwell. Like the Athenian players, they were sought out by the best dramatists of the day. Molière and Corneille generally had their own actors, and by this system the theatre in Paris became a vital, organic whole, galvanized by competition but seldom impaired by jealousy, where actors and dramatists and audience were animated by a common enthusiasm and diversified by a various taste.

It will seem only proper that, in modern Europe, the actress should first have appeared on the French stage. The heroines of Shakespeare had always been played by boys, and this convention had placed certain limits even on Shakespeare's genius. But the French dramatist of the *grand siècle* was hampered by no restric-

tions of this kind. Very soon their names enliven the gossip of the period—La Bellerose, La Beaupré, La Valliotte—and they must have done a great deal to make the theatre fashionable. Until that momentous day in 1646 when Molière founded his own company, you could take your choice of entertainment between the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which had once been the palace of the Dukes of Burgundy, and the Marais tennis court, converted to theatrical use. The Bourgogne was the home of tragi-comedy. There the troupe of Alexandre Hardy had acted their master's plays, as they fell prolific from his pen. There the Italian companies with their novelty of style and wealth of gesture, had been introduced by Henry IV, Marie de Medici, and Anne of Austria. These were the offspring of that much earlier Italian Renaissance, which was already tainted with the vulgarity of invincible success, and the French welcomed them warmly. At the Marais the first plays of Corneille were produced. They were acted by Mondory, a fine actor of the robustious, periwig-pated school, who died from the effects of his own histrionic violence. But when Mondory was dead, Corneille took his plays to the Bourgogne. There already existed a healthy rivalry between the two theatres. At the Bourgogne Hardy had been succeeded by Rotrou, who was the first man in Paris to claim exemption from the dramatic unities of Aristotle; and the Bourgogne developed a school of acting—affected, precious, and sentimental—very different from

Mondory's rhetorical realism. Bellerose was the chief exponent of this. A contemporary wrote of him that "Bellerose was always an affected actor, who looked where he was putting his hat for fear of spoiling the feathers. Sometimes he succeeded in telling stories and reciting love-passages well, but he did not in the least understand what he was saying." Although the Marais was served by the great comedian Jodellet, it never recovered its prestige, and when Molière came into the lists the Bourgogne was his principal rival. He has left us a few pen pictures of its actors, and, as with everything that Molière touched, they come alive. There was Montfleury, whose style was pilloried in the single word—"brouhaha"; and Madame Beauchateau, wife of the famous juvenile. Of her Molière wrote in the *Impromptu at Versailles*: "Don't you see how natural and full of passion that is? Look what a smiling face she keeps through her deepest afflictions."

The history of the theatre has its milestones which are very clear in retrospect. There was that moment when Æschylus introduced the second actor; when a boy played Rosalind; when the actresses came to Paris; when Stanislavsky collaborated with Nemirovitch Danchenko in Moscow, and Barker with Vedrenne in London; when Poel first reconstructed the Elizabethan stage and invited people to a performance at eleven o'clock in the morning. All these movements had in them the seeds of revolution, and beside them we may well put the moment when

Molière formed the Troupe Illustre. Their début in Paris from December, 1643, to April, 1644, was a comparative failure; but that is the way of inexperienced people when they throw themselves upon the untender mercies of a metropolitan audience. Molière did what many a lesser man has done since. He retired with his troupe into the country. He toured the provinces. More than this, in 1645 he took lessons from the great Italian actor Tiberio Fiorilli; for Molière had the genius of taking pains. During his tour he was supported for many years by the Prince de Conti, and all the time an event was taking place whose importance can hardly be overestimated in the theatre—he and his company were coming very perfectly to understand each other.

At last, in 1658, after twelve years of touring, they appeared before the Grand Monarque. The programme consisted of *Nicomède* by Corneille, and *Le Médecin Amoureux* by Molière himself. It was not a particularly exciting programme, but Louis admired the acting of the troupe, spontaneous, inventive, perfectly co-ordinated and controlled. Remember, these people had been acting together for twelve years. Few companies of equal merit to-day would be content to tour the provinces for so long. One thinks of Benson and D'Oyly Carte and the Compagnie des Quinze. Some years ago I visited the rural headquarters of the Compagnie des Quinze. I walked out to it from Aix-en-Provence, in the

sunshine of a January afternoon. It was a small, disused farmhouse. Not many actors were there, but they showed me round—I remember the airy, empty rooms, and a number of masks which had perhaps been used in *Nôce*, perhaps in *Loire*. In Provence one is very near to the Greek spirit, and these masks set me thinking of the Greek theatre. But the silence, the concentrated quiet of the place, set me thinking, too, of Molière and those long years of preparation, and wondering about the perfection of the thing he wrought.

There was, I have said, no doubt of that perfection in the mind of the Grand Monarque. He gave them the old theatrical hall of the Petit Bourbon to play in, and his brother, the Duc d'Orléans, became their patron. They were now known as the Troupe de Monsieur. Few modern theatres are as intimate or as elegant as the Petit Bourbon, with its chandeliers, and double tiers of seats, and arcaded galleries, and pretty proscenium stage. It had been the home of the great Cardinal de Richelieu, who deserved well of his countrymen for not frowning upon the actresses when they came to Paris, and it now became the home of Molière. And precisely because of this, it became the shrine of the French genius at the hour of its grandest efflorescence. There were many finer theatres in Europe—at Parma, and at Mondragone, which Evelyn visited, and in Prince Galicano's palace at Rome—but none so honourable to posterity as this one. Molière remained there

from the night when he gave his first public performance in *L'Étourdi* to the night when he died in his dressing-room after playing in *La Malade Imaginaire*.

This company of his was something new in the theatre and we want to know what it was like. It was the first school of natural acting, not fussy, finicky realistic acting, but natural acting as du Maurier and Hare and Ellen Terry and Eleonore Duse understood the word. It was never inflated, pompous, or coarse. But then Molière was there to direct it, and that was very much like acting under the Muse of Comedy herself. Molière had a keen eye for silliness and an unerring eye for truth. He conducted his own rehearsals and we read that he "reproved the actor if he overstepped nature in act or gesture." He once said to Croisy, who was his original Tartuffe: "You play a poet's part and you ought to be fully taken up with your impersonation. Indicate the pedantic air he preserves throughout his intercourse with the fashionable world; the sententious tone of voice and precise pronunciation of every syllable, and do not miss a single word of the most correct spelling." He told Bricourt how to behave like a good courtier; or, as we should say, like a gentleman. "Assume a calm manner, a natural tone of voice, and gesticulate as little as possible." Nothing of the French monkey about this, but then to Molière acting, and particularly comedy, of which he was a master, was a serious thing. Just how serious it was, even a great

critic like Boileau could never understand. He always wanted to know why Molière didn't rest on his dramatic laurels and leave the histrionics to his troupe. But then Boileau, like any literary gent, didn't realize that to a man like Molière acting and play-writing are one thing—the Theatre. He was in love with that thing, and he would no more have left any part of it than a lover will voluntarily leave his mistress, or declare that henceforward he will only visit her on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

Besides, Molière was an extremely good actor. I dare say that in comedy he was great. You have only to look at his portrait as Cæsar in *La Mort de Pompée* to realize the vividness of his personal appeal, his strength, his sincerity. The nose is finely chiselled, the nostrils broad, the mouth large and sensitive; the eyes profoundly shadowed by the brows and set widely apart. Cæsar was not one of his successes, for he could never play tragedy, and, like the sensible man that he was, he gave it up at last when he saw that he was no good. But he was an expert in the art of declamation. He composed for his own benefit and that of his company, a system of notation which was afterwards used by Michael Baron, the great actor who dominated the French stage after his death. So far from being a sloppy realist, he ridiculed the actors of the Bourgogne "for reciting their parts just as they talked," and for "not knowing how to make the verses tell or to pause at a fine passage." He himself was inclined to grimace and he suffered from an

occasional impediment in his speech when he spoke rapidly. Grimarest called it a "tic de gorge," but it only spoiled him in tragedy—and for tragedy, as I have said, he was not naturally fitted.

This is not the place to examine just what Molière meant by comedy, but it is sufficient to say that he had not lost the tragic sense of life in a way that Wycherley or Congreve or Sheridan had evidently lost it. He was, however, very concerned to reform the existing way of acting tragedy, as he saw it at the Bourgogne. He wanted to make it more natural and flexible and real, and all his own unsuccessful essays in tragic acting were made to illustrate his convictions. However, he had the power of very great men to create disciples, and he handed on his ideas to Michel Baron, who brought them to the Bourgogne after Molière was dead. I like to think of Molière's restless energy living after him, and fertilizing the French theatre until Baron's death in the eighteenth century. Baron perfected Molière's tragic method and then retired, in a fit of pique, at the age of thirty-eight. Then at sixty he returned, not only with his powers unimpaired, but master of an entirely new style. Elena Riccaboni, the Italian actress, wrote that "he had introduced an entirely new manner, not hitherto known on your tragic stage, that is to say that he speaks and does not declaim. He always listens to his fellow-actors, a thing to which actors as a rule pay little heed, and his attention is accompanied by such movements of

face and body as are required by the nature of the speeches to which he listens. When speaking, his talk is real conversation."

This might be a description of any good actor's performance to-day or to-morrow, and we may cite it as evidence that Molière was the father of the modern stage. He made other actors, as well as Baron; or rather, he helped them to make themselves. There was the comedian, René Berthélot, who was with him from the start. "Je suis homme fort rond de toutes les manières," were the words Molière put into his mouth; and there was Charles Varlet de la Grange, perhaps the best *jeune premier* that ever played. He was the dandy, the bourgeois, the honest youth, the Don Juan. He lives for us even now, fluent and graceful in his movement, with his well-made, well-marked features, and his small, sarcastic mouth. But those men were, after all, no more than themselves. They were not Molière. Molière was the spirit of the Theatre, its tinsel and glitter refined in the purity of his taste, its patience eloquent in his life, and its radiant gaiety and courage speaking in that last question he put as he lay dying in his dressing-room:

"Was it all right? How did they like the play?"

The pathos of this might be turned to theatrical account, but it was not theatrical. It was real. To refer, even so briefly, to the work of Molière is to include all those others—Irving, Diaghileff, Craig, Copeau, Talma, Gar-

rick, and Kean—who in their different ways have given life to the Theatre. It is always the same story. Those men do not destroy the law; they fulfil it. They take an existing tradition and mould it afresh. They create a style. They go back to the day before yesterday and thus anticipate the day after to-morrow. They only realize the necessity of overhauling a little the thing that we did last night.

And we can trace a similarity in their revolutions, from which it is possible to deduce certain fixed principles about the art of acting. Garrick did for the English stage in the eighteenth century very much what Molière did for the French stage in the seventeenth. They were even temperamentally akin, and Garrick's blood was half French and half Irish, an excellent mixture. He was well-formed and well-graced, with delicate, mobile, distinguished features on which pathos and laughter could play. His art was natural, as the French understood that word; perhaps it would be simpler to say that it was alive. When the stolid and declamatory Quin first went to see him play, he exclaimed: "If this young fellow is right, we are all wrong." Quin was quite correct in his deduction; they *were* all wrong. And it was Garrick's great work to put them right.

There is no necessary contradiction between leadership and ensemble; on the contrary, the great leaders of the stage have generally been the first to insist on team work. It was so with Molière; it was so with Garrick; it was so with

Irving. Garrick's beneficent autocracy at Drury Lane was a reign of equal glory with Irving's at the Lyceum. The English theatre had never yet stood so high in critical esteem. And what he did was to create actors, to evoke from others a little of his own suppleness and versatility. Character-acting, as we know it to-day, the getting inside of, instead of standing outside of a part, was really introduced to us by Garrick. He brought the quickness of the comedian into the delineation of tragic rôles, so that you seemed to be seeing them for the first time. People sometimes express astonishment that he should have played Lear in a powdered wig instead of in the romantic-heroical trappings then in vogue. But that particular revolution has been repeated to-day. After all, he was only playing him in modern dress.

Kean was to make John Philip Kemble an anachronism, just as Garrick had made Quin. There is always a danger for actors to become frozen in a particular style, until genius comes along to make them melt. The limitation of John Philip Kemble was not that he could not alter his personality, but that he could not modify his style. When Hazlitt wrote that "Kean has all that Kemble wants of perfection," he meant that Kemble's academicism would have been very different if it had been lit by the divine fire. And that is the truth about acting: either the spark is there or it isn't. When it is present, you will admire equally the *chiaro ed oscuro* of Irving and Forbes Robertson's classic

grace; the Alexandrine which was Mounet Sully, or the ballade which was Coquelin. From Garrick to Irving, the history of the Theatre was the history of great acting; the return of the dramatist with Chekov and Ibsen and Pirandello has been delayed until our own times. It is not without significance that the centuries of great acting were the centuries of individualism, when the human personality was given almost unlimited sway. This supremacy was bought at a price; that one might be rich, many starved. But the same concentration on the individual character, viewed in isolation, which was the mark of Coleridge's criticism, was the mark of Kean's acting. Indeed, that astonishing genius was the theatrical expression of the whole romantic movement. To watch him act was, as Coleridge said, "to read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning." To read life by lightning might almost be taken as a definition of the romantic attitude.

Great acting, then, has always had the stamp of nature, but it has generally run into a groove which is called classical or a groove which is called romantic. Fanny Kemble, the niece of John Philip and the daughter of Charles Kemble, puts the difference perfectly in comparing her father and Kean; and Fanny herself was an actress of genius.

"A picture requires light and shadow; and the very relief that throws some of the figures in a fine painting into apparent obscurity, in reality enhances the effect produced by those

over which the artist has shed a stronger light. . . . This being so, I think that acting the best which skilfully husband the actor's and spectator's powers, and puts forth the whole of the one, to call forth the whole of the other, occasionally only; leaving the intermediate parts sufficiently level, to allow him and them to recover the capability of again producing, and again receiving, such impressions. It is constant that our finest nerves deaden and dull from over-excitement, and require repose, before they regain their acute power of sensation. At the same time, I am far from advocating that *most imperfect conception and embodying* of a part which Kean allows himself; literally acting detached passages alone, and leaving all the others, and the entire character, indeed, utterly destitute of unity, or the semblance of any consistency whatever. But Kean and my father are immediately each other's antipodes, and in adopting their different styles of acting, it is evident that each has been guided as much by his own physical and intellectual individuality, as by any fixed principle of art. The one, Kean, possesses particular physical qualifications, an eye like an orb of light, a voice, exquisitely touching and melodious in its tenderness, and in the harsh dissonance of vehement passion, terribly true; to these he adds the intellectual ones of vigour, intensity, amazing power of concentrating effect: these give him an entire mastery over his audience in all striking, sudden, impassioned passages; in fulfilling which, he has

contented himself, leaving unheeded what he probably could not compass, the unity of conception, the refinement of detail, and evenness of execution. My father possesses certain physical defects, a faintness of colouring in the face and eye, a weakness of voice; and the corresponding intellectual deficiencies, a want of intensity, vigour, and concentrating power: these circumstances have led him (probably unconsciously) to give his attention and study to the finer and more fleeting shades of character, the more graceful and delicate manifestations of feeling, the exquisite variety of all minor parts, the classic keeping of a highly-wrought whole; to all those, polished and refined tastes, an acute sense of the beauty of harmonious proportions, and a native grace, gentleness, and refinement of mind and manner, have been his prompters; but they cannot inspire these startling and tremendous bursts of passion, which belong to the highest walks of tragedy, and to which he never gave their fullest expression. I fancy my Aunt Siddons united the excellencies of both these styles."

Siddons, Rachel, Talma, Salvini—of how many more could the same be said?

It would be unfair to say that acting to-day has declined because its peaks are lower: perhaps its average is higher than it has ever been. But the theatre does not play the same part in the lives of cultivated (or even of educated) people that it did even thirty years ago. You will often find an incomprehensible preference for the

cinema on the part of *soi-disant* intellectuals, and the puerilities of Hollywood have debased the most intelligent tastes. There are many more plays of merit being performed to-day than there were fifty years ago, and there is never a want of good actors to play in them. But acting is less discussed. The theatre is controlled by anonymous finance where it used to be controlled by actors reaping the harvest of their labours. No doubt the actor-manager had his faults, preferring sometimes to shine through the indifferent quality of those supporting him, but he hitched the theatrical waggon to a star and the dignity and welfare of the profession were bound up with his personal success. The system was better by which he was occasionally bad than the system by which he is generally absent.

When Meggie Albanesi died, Mr. Basil Dean wrote of her that she was the "English Rachel not yet come to the fullness of her powers." Whether this judgment was true we shall never know, but her talent was very typical, in its truth and quiet and integrity, of all that is best in modern acting, for these are some, at least, of the qualities which fine acting must comprehend. They are human qualities, and acting is human, or it is below itself. There was a fashionable movement about fifteen years ago, called Expressionism, which could only see characters as types, and men as robots. It came, like so many crude ideas, from Germany, and it was not appreciably sillier than the type of propagandist

theatre which the Nazis are encouraging to-day. I do not deny that an actor may reasonably be called upon to interpret an idea; but I do deny that this is somehow superior to interpreting a character. Every actor knows that quite the contrary is true; the first is child's play to the second. But then one does occasionally admit to a fear that civilization is entering its second childhood.

Modern acting has been largely moulded by a few directors of genius—Stanislavsky, Copeau, Barker, and Saint Denis—and it is not to belittle the work of these men to say that in this subjection there lies a certain danger. Actors may begin to lose their initiative and to forget that they are responsible, creative artists; that they are, as I have said, the primary factor in theatrical entertainment. I shall have much to say in the next lecture on the importance of training, but it is possible for an actor to be trained too hard and I hope I may be forgiven a doubt whether the actor of to-day has that sense of his own importance, which will raise him—if it is combined with the divine spark—to the pinnacles he has reached in the past.

THE TECHNIQUE OF
ACTING

Miss Tempest or Miss Vanbrugh has to say.

When we say that an actor's technique is obvious, we mean that we can see how he does it. This is not always, though it is sometimes, a bad thing. It is only bad when we are so busy attending to the how, that the why escapes us altogether. I have already referred to that moment in the last act of *Dear Brutus* where du Maurier suddenly realized that his daughter was only a dream. I saw *Dear Brutus* twice: the original production and a revival. Du Maurier played in both. The first time he moved me very much. I can't remember what he did; I only remember that I was moved. The second time I was hardly moved at all, but I remember very clearly what he did. He held on, I think, to a chair; then advanced down-stage and held on to another. It was all very carefully worked out. But I was so busy following its calculation that the emotion failed to touch me. You will remember my quotation from Mr. Bridie that "to act is to create the perfect union between body, mind, and spirit." I think that on that afternoon du Maurier's mind and spirit were not working in perfect union with his body. That synthesis is not easily achieved even by the best actors, and it is hardly ever consistently maintained.

The reason for this is clear. Some actors are more quickly affected by outside circumstances than others; they find concentration difficult. The stage should be a private place, however many there may be watching or performing on

it. No third party should interrupt the conversation between the actor and his art. Some of the best actors are the most uneven, and some of the most mediocre are the most consistent. The strength of an actor's temperament may be the measure in which his spirit may fail his technique; or, conversely, the measure in which his technique may fail his spirit, especially in those early days before he has had time to mature it. The best actors, like the best writers, have a lot to say before they find a way of saying it. The content continually breaks down the form, like an expanding flood before the dykes are strong enough to hold it. But the cult of what I may call "crude sincerity" is as foolish as the cult of external accomplishment. Both defeat the purposes of art.

Acting cannot be taught. It is a gift from God and its expression must come from within. Actors cannot be made; they can only be helped along the road. You can tell an actor or an actress in a moment. Of two young women before you, one may be angular, plain, unattractive even, but still you may say of her: "This girl can create character or communicate emotion." The other may be svelte, personable, even beautiful; but yet you will say of her: "This girl will get a long way by look and may make enough money to retire at thirty. Denham and Hollywood might fake her up into a temporary success. But she will not last and she will never be able to act. She doesn't come across the room, let alone across

the footlights." Fanny Kemble, one of the most luminous minds that ever worked in the theatre, wrote in her journal (1820): "On our way to Mr.—'s, my father told me he had been seeing Miss Clifton, the girl they want him to teach to act; (to *teach* to act, quotha!) he says she is very pretty indeed, with fine eyes, a fair, delicate skin, and a handsome mouth; moreover, a tall woman, and yet from the front of the house her effect is nought. What a pity, and how provoking!" It is indeed a pity, but that is the first thing acting must do. It must come across the footlights.

Very often one is moved by an actress in rehearsal. One goes about saying: "X will give a lovely performance." Then, on the night, she doesn't "come over." You yourself are still remembering her as you watched her rehearsing at close quarters. You don't see the difference. But your friends do. "Isn't X lovely?" you say. But they reply: "She looked very beautiful, but somehow she doesn't get across. We preferred Y." Now Y was giving what you, perhaps, had thought an effective, but obvious performance: no subtlety, no shading. And she may not have been as good as your friends thought. But certainly X lacked something, the loss of which had escaped you.

What had happened, I think, was this. X was playing too much within herself. She may have had the technique to reach her audience, or she may not. But she had not spiritually included them. Acting, I repeat, must come

from within, and the very projection of voice and use of gesture must be the expression of that spiritual embrace. Whatever your convention—whether it be the naturalism of Chekov, the symbolism of Ibsen, the rhetoric of Shakespeare, or the open invitation of the Music Hall—your slightest action and least inflection must spring not only from an understanding of your part, but from a love of your audience. It must spring from an inward generosity. When we compare a great deal of contemporary acting with what we know or have read of acting in the past, I think it is just this quality that we find missing. The excessive cult of naturalism, the consciousness of the fourth wall, have made actors timid of their audience, and their playing is impoverished as a result.

There is a danger—and it is a peril which in the division of these lectures I have not altogether escaped—of regarding technique too much as a watertight compartment of acting, whereas, of course, as Mr. Bridie reminds us, acting is all one thing. The famous French gourmet, Brillat Savarin, said once: "Show me what a man eats and I will show you what he is." We must remember that he was speaking of French food, but nevertheless you can, I think, say of a writer, equally as of an actor: "The style is the man." And a good style in prose, like a good style in painting or acting, is an expression of the whole personality, formed from within, not moulded from without. Style

is a better, because a simpler, word, than technique. You cannot separate the style of Clarendon, Swift, Newman, Gosse, or T. S. Eliot from the matter or from the mind behind it. On the other hand, Pater or Macaulay or Winston Churchill seem to have said to themselves: "Let me find a picturesque or an orotund style to suit the high civilization or the great events I am describing." You may not agree with these comparisons, and there is no reason why you should. I am only concerned to illustrate the truth that good acting, like good writing, is all of a piece.

It follows that when an actor has learned the grammar and syntax of his business, the less he bothers about his style the better. Once he has mastered his means, he is free, and because he is free, he is spontaneous. Spontaneity is among the hall-marks of great art. One cannot be spontaneous as long as one is fettered by self-consciousness, and self-consciousness is the actor's deadliest foe. It kills instantly. You will often hear people arguing, not very sensibly, as to whether an actor should "live" the part he is playing. The answer is, surely, that a part of him must always be detached. He must be able to direct the emotions he unchains. To say that an actor must live the part of Othello is to talk manifest nonsense. If he did, Desdemona would end her evening in the mortuary; and his own performance would be so much the less effective. All an actor's tears are of no avail unless he makes the

audience weep with him. Acting is a deliberate work of simulation; and any work that is responsible and deliberate is controlled. The actor exercises the same control over his histrionic actions on the stage as he does over his moral actions off it; and in so far as that control is effective, he is a good actor or a good man. The good actor always acts into a mirror, but he keeps it well out of sight. His self-regard only becomes self-consciousness when he allows it to be seen.

Shakespeare puts the matter very succinctly in *The Winter's Tale*. Perdita is speaking to Polixenes of the flowers in her garden:

Sir, the year growing ancient
Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o' the
season

Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,
Which some call nature's bastards; of that kind
Our rustic garden's barren; and I care not
To get slips of them.

Pol: Wherefore, gentle maiden,
Do you neglect them?

Per: For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature.

Pol: Say there be;
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean; so, over that art
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we
marry

A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race; this is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.

I don't think anyone would deny that, within this interpretation, the art of acting should be natural.

The actor, then, attains to freedom by a mastery of his means, and it is this mastery which we call technique. We have seen that he evolves it from within himself. It is something as personal to him as his temperament or his appearance. It is his signature. We must now examine the methods and the principles upon which he works.

I have spoken of the projection of the voice, and this same idea of projection governs the actor's whole approach to his performance. It has got to reach his audience both in the gallery and the stalls. He must be neither too intimate for the first, nor too broad for the second. He must satisfy them both, as far as he reasonably can; for it stands to reason that those nearer to him will appreciate the finer shades of his performance better than those who are farther off. The subtleties of his facial play will be invisible to the "gods," although they will catch the least movement of his hand or head. Some years ago I went into the gallery of the theatre to hear Miss Ruth Draper, but I am sorry to say that very little of what that gifted lady said was audible to me. I am sure the

fault was not in me, because my complaint was shared by many others in that part of the house. Being young and intrepid at the time, I wrote to Miss Draper and said that our enjoyment of her brilliant work had been largely spoilt by our inability to hear. She replied to me, very courteously, that she was sorry to learn this, but that the intimate character of her sketches did not permit of her raising her voice any louder. I was honoured that Miss Draper should have answered me, but I cannot say that I was convinced by her reply.

Fanny Kemble has a most interesting passage on this problem in her *Journal*. She is describing her father, Charles Kemble's performance of Hamlet.

"I watched my father narrowly through his part to-night with great attention and some consequent fatigue, and the conclusion I have come to is this: that though his workmanship may be, and is, far finer *in the hand*, than that of any other artist I ever saw, yet its very minute accuracy and refinement renders it unfit for the frame in which it is exhibited. Whoever should paint a scene calculated for so large a space as a theatre, and destined to be viewed at the distance from which an audience beholds it, with the laborious finish and fine detail of a miniature, would commit a great error in judgment. Nor would he have the least right to complain, although the public should prefer the coarser, yet far more effective work of a painter, who, neglecting all refinement and

niceness of execution, should merely paint with such full colouring, and breadth and boldness of touch, as to produce in the wide space he is called upon to fill, and upon the remote senses he appeals to, the *effect* of that which he intends to represent. Indeed, he is the better artist of the two, though probably not the most intellectual man."

If you watch Miss Tempest, you will receive an object lesson in this art of projection. I must have seen her, at different times, from all parts of the house, and I have never missed a word of her performance. That is because she never misses her aim. The sheer accuracy of her inflection and timing sends her meaning shooting up to the last tier of the gallery. And this is the more remarkable as she gives no effect of exaggerated care and no appearance at all of effort. I am told by those who know that an experienced shot will usually cock his gun up to his shoulder and bring down his bird without, apparently, taking serious aim; whereas your amateur will miss his target through an over-anxiety and an excess of labour. In a word, Miss Tempest does it but you cannot quite tell how. All perfection, I suppose, has this effect of careless ease. It depends on balance, rhythm, harmony. The movement of a dancer or a racehorse, the suppleness and poise of an athlete, illustrate the same perfection. It goes to prove that in *acting*, as in *much else*, we must be disciplined before we can be free.

If actors were to walk and talk and make love on the stage as they do in real life, the result would be embarrassing, horrible, or ineffective. Naturalism demands as much calculation as rhetoric; indeed, there is nothing more difficult than to appear really natural on the stage. All that cumulative detail of movement and inflection whose sum effect is one of complete actuality, is the result of the most fastidious selection and care. We in the audience see a man walk on to the stage, open a cigarette-case, offer a cigarette to a lady, light it, then light one for himself, close the cigarette-case, put it away in his pocket, and all the while carry on an animated or leisurely, an important or a casual conversation. When du Maurier did this, we did not know how it was done, but it was conceived and executed quite as deliberately as a dance. It had no doubt been rehearsed many times in slow motion, gradually quickened into the tempo of actuality, and finally become second nature to both players concerned: for du Maurier had the power of raising those who acted with him at least some way to his own level. Or take a man who has committed a murder. He has long ago repented of his crime and grown into a respected citizen, say the Burgomaster of his village. He had murdered a Polish Jew to obtain money for his child, and ever afterwards he is haunted by the sleigh-bells of his victim. He hears them at any moment, and particularly when something is said to remind him of his crime. This is how Gordon

Craig describes Irving's first entrance in *The Bells*.¹

" . . . as the applause dies away, at the first sign of it dying, the actor clips it off by a sudden gesture of awakening from his long and patiently-endured ordeal, flings cap and whip to right and left, and begins to shed his coat, his muffler, as his wife and daughter run to help him off with them. . . . The process of getting rid of his coat and brushing off the snow as he stands on the mat by the door being over, he works his way down to a chair in the centre . . . and there, taking off his boots, he begins to put on and buckle his shoes. . . . The men at the table, who are smoking and drinking lazily; are telling in drawling tones that just before he came in they were saying that they did not remember a night like this since what was called the Polish Jew's winter.

" By the time the speaker had got this slowly out—and it was dragged purposely—Irving was buckling his second shoe, seated, and leaning over it with his two long hands stretched down over the buckles. We suddenly saw these fingers stop their work; the crown of the head suddenly seemed to glitter and become frozen—and then, at the pace of the slowest and most terrified snail, the two hands, still motionless and dead, were seen to be coming up the side of the leg . . . the whole torso of the man, also seeming frozen, was gradually and by an almost imper-

¹ Quoted from E. Gordon Craig's *Henry Irving* by courtesy of the author and Messrs. J. M. Dent & Son Ltd.

ceptible movement, seen to be drawing up and back, as it would straighten a little, and to lean a little against the back of the chair on which he was seated.

"Once in that position—motionless—eyes fixed ahead of him and fixed on us all—there he sat for the space of ten or twelve seconds, which, I can assure you, seemed to us all like a lifetime, and then said—and said in a voice deep and overwhelmingly beautiful: 'Oh, you were talking of that, were you?' And as the last syllable was uttered, there came afar off the regular throbbing sound of sledge-bells.

"There he sat looking at us, and there sat the others, smoking and musing and comfortably motionless, except for the smoke from their pipes, and on and on went the sound of those bells, on and on and on—nothing else. Again, I assure you, that time seemed out of joint, and moved as it moves to us who suffer, when we wish it would move on and it does not stir.

"And the next step of his dance began.

"He moves his head slowly from us—the eyes still somehow with us—and moves it to the right—taking as long as a long journey to discover a truth takes. He looks to the faces on the right—nothing. Slowly the head revolves back again, down, and along the tunnels of thought and sorrow, and at the end the face and eyes are bent upon those to the left of him . . . utter stillness . . . nothing there—everyone is concerned with his or her little doings—smoking or knitting or unravelling wool or scraping a

plank slowly and silently. A long pause, endless, breaking our hearts, comes down over everything, and on and on go these bells. Puzzled, motionless . . . he glides up to a standing position: never has anyone seen another rising figure which slid slowly up like that. With one arm slightly raised, with sensitive hand speaking of far-off, apprehended sounds, he asks, in the voice of some woman who is frightened, yet does not wish to frighten those with her: 'Don't you . . . don't you hear the sound of sledge-bells on the road?' 'Sledge-bells?' grumbles the smoking man; 'Sledge-bells?' pipes his companion; 'Sledge-bells?' says the wife—all of them seemingly too sleepy and comfortable to apprehend anything . . . see anything . . . or understand . . . and as they grumble a negative, suddenly he staggers, and shivers from his toes to his neck; his jaws begin to chatter; the hair on his forehead, falling over a little, writhes as though it were a nest of little snakes. Everyone is on his feet at once to help. 'Caught a chill,' 'Let's get him to bed' . . . and one of the moments of the immense and touching dance closes—only one—and the next one begins, and the next after—figure after figure of exquisite pattern and purpose is unfolded, and then closed, and ever a new one unfolded in its wake."

I make no apology for quoting this long extract. In its vividness, accuracy, and elaboration of detail it gives a marvellous description of great acting. We see the whole procession

of cause and effect, as though the wheels were being slowed down for our benefit. Yet Mr. Craig tells us that this was only the first movement of the dance. How real and yet how artificial it is! -What a triumph of imagination and pains! To me the most significant part of the description is Mr. Craig's remark that the crown of Irving's head "suddenly seemed to glitter and become frozen." There was more in this than talent and calculation could have wrought. It was the transubstantiation of genius.

You will have noticed, of course, that the secret of this projection is timing. The difference between scoring a boundary and being caught at square-leg is the difference between good and bad timing. The return of a dangerous service, the successful passing of the ball between attacking three-quarters, depends on timing. In the same way the actor must learn not only how, but when to do it. Comedy, in particular, demands exact timing; and the actor can always tell by the reaction of a laugh whether his aim has been correct. He must know just how long it takes his words and thoughts to travel across the footlights. If he speaks too quickly or too slowly, too quietly or too loud, they will collapse before they reach the stalls. He must calculate the time-lag, and he can only calculate by experiment.

Acting is ceaseless experiment. There is no single right way of doing anything, and even if an effect is good there is no reason why it may not be better. If I may speak personally for a

moment, I had a neat problem of this kind when I was playing Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*. You may remember the scene where the Archbishop preaches to his people on Christmas Eve. Towards the close of his sermon he prophesies that he will never see them again and that before long they may have another martyr in Canterbury. Then he bids them keep what he has said in their hearts and think of it at another time. Now we have it on historical record that Becket completely broke down during this last sermon and that his final words were drowned in tears. Clearly that would be—to recall the adjectives I used just now—both ineffective and embarrassing on the stage. Indeed, some people, whose judgment I greatly respected, held that I should not betray any emotion at all at this moment, and that by showing a stoic front I should achieve a kind of inverted pathos. I did not myself agree with this reading of the scene, but I tried it out. I do not think anyone thought it was successful. So I returned to my original idea. This was just to indicate by a break in the voice and a hesitation in the delivery, the profound emotion which the Archbishop felt at the imminent parting from his flock. The problem was to find the right moment for the break. This is how the words run:

“ . . . because, dear children, I do not think I shall ever preach to you *again*, and because it is possible that very soon you may have *another martyr*—and that one perhaps not the

capricious masters! In India the study of gesture is regarded as a religion. No dancer ties the bells upon her ankles before dancing without first touching her forehead and eyes with the bells and repeating a brief prayer.

It is our inescapable limitation that we cannot see ourselves. Our mirror, whichever way we carry it, is clouded. All that we do must be judged by its effect upon our audience. Will that inflection carry? Will that gesture tell? *A scene which in real life we should play vis-à-vis with our partner, must, on the stage be played with our mental, and very often, our physical eye upon the audience.* It is not enough that our face should tell the story of our feelings, if the audience are not let into the secret. In few plays to-day are the audience deliberately addressed, and we must act within the convention of the fourth wall. But we should always let them into the secret. We should ensure that the window is wide enough for them to see through, and the latch left sufficiently ajar.

There is matter for many lectures in the study of gesture and speech; and until a player has achieved some mastery of both he will be unfit to appear in public. We have seen how speech must be projected, but unless we inflect our words they will drop, leaden, upon the floor. Inflection gives them wings. An inflected whisper will carry to the back of Drury Lane; an unmodulated shout will be inaudible everywhere. Inflection, or tune, will reach not only

the ears but the intelligence of our hearers, for it is the prime messenger of meaning. It is by inflection that we give tenderness, sarcasm, or indifference to the "Yeses" and the "Noes," the "Good-byes" and the "Good nights" which so often mark the climaxes of modern drama. Secondly to inflection, we rely on stress. We must choose the salient words in one sentence and emphasize them at the expense of the others. Nowhere is this more important than in spoken verse. Take the lines from *Hamlet*:

Whether 'tis *nobler* in the mind to *suffer*
the *slings* and *arrows* of *outrageous* fortune
or to take *arms* against a *sea* of troubles
and by *opposing* *end* them.

The actor's temptation is to follow the beat blindly and to emphasize the words italicized above. In this way no meaning will clearly emerge, and the effect will be one of slowness and monotony. But if he speaks them in this way:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to *suffer*
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
or to take arms against a sea of troubles
and by *opposing* *end* them,

the correct antitheses of Hamlet's thought are brought out, and instead of twelve words being emphasized there are four. Also we gain an effect of speed.

The great exponent of this method, which is equally applicable to the clipped, conversational

speech of modern comedy, was the late William Poel, and I cannot do better, in bringing these lectures to a close, than pay a tribute to this great teacher. The name of William Poel, who died nearly four years ago at the age of eighty-two, was not familiar to the common run of playgoers, but it was honoured by those select few who still claim for the theatre a high place in the life of a civilized community. The son of a Fellow of the Royal Society, Poel was reared against a backcloth of pre-Raphaelite romanticism, and Holman Hunt chose his infant features for an image of the Divine Child. Later he went on the stage and acquired under Charles Mathews and Benson the experience on which he was to build his life's work. That work was a revolution which succeeded, carried out by a rebel who was never recognized.

Poel's devotion to dramatic literature made him familiar with Shakespeare, and it was he who first saw how the nineteenth century realistic methods of production obscured the beauty and distorted the rhythm of the plays. From the first moment when he founded the Elizabethan Stage Society, in 1894, he insisted that Shakespeare must be spoken with a natural and yet musical rapidity, must be played with an all-but-unbroken continuity and on a stage conforming as far as possible to the stage for which Shakespeare wrote. This was his gospel.

He always refused to work in and for the commercial theatre because he knew that he would be forced to compromise and compromise

was not in his nature. Instead he gave his "demonstrations" in ethical churches, or in the quadrangle of the Charterhouse, or in the halls of the Inns of Court. Of later years he would sometimes take a theatre and build out a platform into the auditorium, attempting thus to recover the space of the Elizabethan stage.

What was his achievement? It was, in the exact sense of the word, prophetic. He was a voice crying in the wilderness where there were few to listen, but he spoke the truth from his heart and the words he spoke fell upon fertile ground. He raised the standard of the escape from realism and hammered home the dogma that convention is a necessity for art. He entirely revolutionized the production of Shakespeare and the speaking of iambic verse, and there has been no intelligent interpretation of a Shakespeare play during the past twenty years which was not in some degree the fruit of his opinions. He discovered Edith Evans, trained Granville Barker, Lillah McCarthy and Esme Percy, profoundly influenced Gordon Craig, Lewis Casson, Harcourt Williams, Bridges Adam and Iden Payne. His ideas have lived anew through them.

Yet, in a sense he was a sublime failure. Though he courted controversy, he shrank from notoriety, with the result that he never achieved it. His later productions, which should have commanded the presence of all intelligent playgoers, were attended by a few actors, a few poets, and a limited number of his own very

faithful adherents. But the conditions of his work prevented him from doing justice to his own convictions. Very often you felt you were in a scientist's laboratory, overlooking a number of interesting but not always successful experiments. There was generally something which didn't quite come off.

Being an artist of genius, Poel was never afraid to take a risk, but this courage betrayed him into eccentricities which grew upon him in later years and obscured the merits of his work. He would commit strange errors of casting, largely, I think, because he laid an almost undue stress upon the voice—an emphasis which would lead him to put girls into boys' parts. These extravagances, coupled with his extreme intransigence in controversy, undoubtedly hindered the wider appreciation which was due to him.

It was my privilege to play regularly for Poel during recent years, and it is as a teacher that I shall chiefly remember him. He taught me, as he taught others, the secrets of acting with an energy of conviction and a humility of heart which will abide with me as long as I live. To come under his tuition was worth many years of the academies, for not only was his advice invaluable, as long as you had the trick of assimilating it, but he himself was so shining an example of courage, patience and integrity that where he led you felt bound to follow, even when he stripped you naked of self-esteem. All that you prized in the theatre was reflected in

him, as he told you how Salvini always entered the theatre two hours before the performance, or as you sat with him trying out strange inflections in a Lyons tea-house or in a small room at the Emerson Club.

I never knew him in the days when he was a firebrand about whom fearful legends were told, but even in these last autumnal years the old fire would blaze forth as he gave you a lesson in technique. The beautiful face would colour with emotion, the long, eloquent hands would tremble, and the tall, frail body would rear itself into an attitude of remembered majesty. But the main impression I bear away from a very close association over the title parts in *Coriolanus* and *Biron* is of his great courtesy and kindness. There was in him much of the scholar, the artist, and the saint, and there was something of each in his appearance. You couldn't help seeing him as he so negligently crossed the street; he was so wonderful to look at that even motorists recalled their manners. It is possible to question the extreme limit to which he pushed his theories, to suggest that he sometimes confused obstinacy with strength, even to ask whether he displayed his genius to its best advantage, but it is not possible to doubt that his character was cast in heroic mould or to deny that he will go down in the history of theatre among the chief inspirations of his times.

He made one inclined to exclaim with Fanny Kemble: "It is not easy to act well." .v

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